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ABSTRACT

In a relatively short period of time, language teaching has been inundated with audio-lingual technique, descriptive linguistics, contrastive analysis, structural linguistics, immediate-constituent analysis, transformational-generative linguistics, the Roberts Series, contrastive rhetoric, bilingualism, and bidialectalism. It takes a teacher's full time just to keep up with the jargon. Many language teachers, particularly those trained in English as a second language, have come to have a certain faith in the audio-lingual technique in language teaching. That technique has been challenged; learning psychologists and psycholinguists have demonstrated that it is based upon a faulty hypothesis. Not only is the ESL teacher often accidentally assigned and inadequately prepared, but he is expected to perform miracles. All these problems, which have not been solved by a national organization, cannot be solved by a local professional organization, but certain activities on the part of a local organization should help: a local newsletter, an annual bibliography of materials, a current listing of academic programs, and a listing of skilled professionals who can serve as consultants on a local level. Other activities that an affiliate organization can undertake to maintain or upgrade the professional status of ESL teachers are also pointed out. (Author/AMM)

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UP FROM THE GRASS ROOTS (WITH MUDDY FEET) :
or, The Race Against Obsolescence*

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by

Robert B. Kaplan

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Out there, beyond the walls of this room, beyond the limits of San Francisco, there are several thousands of individuals, out of the reach of my voice, standing, perhaps at this very moment, on the academic firing line--no pun intended--teaching (or trying to teach) English to innocent little children.

I shall attempt to concern myself with the tasks that an affiliate, once created, can perform to help that teacher. (That is the reason for the adjective muddy in my title. Since affiliates are so new in TESOL, it is a bit hard to know just what they can--or should--attempt to do.)

The fact is, however, that the state of the art appears to be exploding out of all proportion. The relatively simple profession of language teaching has gotten completely out of hand. The Linguists got into the act right after the end of World War II, and linguists, like lemmings, tend to reproduce (metaphorically) at an impressive rate. Now we are possessed not only of linguists, but of all sorts of prehyphenated linguists: applied-, historical-, anthropological-, socio-, theoretico-, transformational-, structural-, neo-whorfian-, yea, verily, even generative- and, alas, psycho-. Nearly all of them have had something to say about language teaching. Since, by a fortuitous accident,

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federal funding was until recently available in English as a second language, they have nearly all managed to say something about teaching English as a second language. Now, by a different kind of accident, funding has become available in bilingual education, and nearly all of them either have already said something about that or are on the verge of saying something. Not only are they generative, but verbal as well.

The intellectual development in which all these linguists are imbedded threatens, like smog, to engulf and destroy the entire biosphere in which language teachers function. Theoretical change has occurred with such rapidity in the last quarter century that even the theorist is hard pressed to stay abreast of it; the poor working teacher, laboring the vineyards eight hours a day every day of the academic year, really doesn't have a chance. In a relatively short period of time--well within the effective life span of a living (and hopefully practicing) teacher, language teaching has been inundated with audio-lingual technique, descriptive linguistics, contrastive analysis, structural linguistics, immediate-constituent analysis, transformational-generative linguistics, the Roberts Series, contrastive rhetoric, bilingualism, bidialectism, etc. It takes one's full time just to keep up with the jargon. As in the illicit drug culture, where addicts change the jargon as fast as the authorities can learn it, linguists seem to change the jargon as fast as (or even faster than) teachers can learn it. Not only do linguists change it, but, like TweedleDum and TweedleDee, they insist that any word shall mean only exactly what they want it to mean at any given point in time. And now, the bureaucrats are going to insist upon the concept of accountability. Indeed, a teacher can easily become obsolete.

Many language teachers, particularly those trained in ESL, have come to have a certain faith in the audio-lingual technique in language teaching. That technique has been challenged; learning psychologists and linguists of the psycho- persuasion have demonstrated that it is based upon a faulty hypothesis. New materials are appearing in the ESL field with increasing rapidity. Some of those materials, like

Rutherford's book, are based on transformational-generative theory. (Our colleagues in public-school English have been even harder hit by recent Statewide adoptions.)

For some years, the Office of Education provided a modicum of help by sponsoring summer institutes for teachers, but in their infinite wisdom they have now withdrawn support for those institutes because the institutes have not produced hard-data evidence of their success. This logic is rather like discontinuing beach life-guards because they haven't been able to demonstrate that they teach swimming effectively.

If I have painted a bleak picture, it is a result of the fact that I think the picture is bleak. The ESL teacher hasn't, in many cases, been trained to do his job. How many of you suddenly found yourself teaching ESL, without training or preparation, nearly overnight, because your district (or your particular school) suddenly discovered that it enrolled a non-English speaking population, and you had once, in a weak moment, indicated an interest in Japanese food, or pre-Columbian art? Not only is the ESL teacher often accidentally assigned and inadequately prepared, but he is expected to perform miracles. Why can't you, after all, teach any child to speak fluent colloquial English in six weeks? What's wrong with you? You are experts--rather by the same sort of logic that confers upon a military officer the title "gentleman," by act of Congress. And since you are experts, you can teach not only in ESL classes but in bi-lingual classes, and in EMR classes, and in remedial reading classes as well.

It would be foolish to imagine that a local professional organization can solve all these problems. Obviously, even the more powerful and larger national organizations have failed to do so. But there do seem to be certain clear activities that a local organization can undertake to aerate the grass roots.

In a meeting of CATESOL, held in Monterey, California, in October 1969, the members present indicated some of the things they wanted from a local organization. These included:

1. The development and distribution of a newsletter, concerned with local affairs, cognizant of local developments, and serving as an information exchange in regard to materials, methods, procedures, and the like, to be published on a regular--at least quarterly--basis.

2. The development of an annual bibliography of textbooks, professional articles of local interest, materials, strategies, etc., to be distributed along with the newsletter.

3. The development of a current list of academic programs designed to be of use to teachers in the field, showing the location, the name of the responsible officer, the cost, the amount of credit available, and the initial and terminal dates.

4. The development of a list of skilled professionals who might serve as consultants within a locality or within larger geographical areas. Such a list should be categorized by various academic levels and various pedagogical skills; for example, elementary-level reading specialists as opposed to highschool-level audio-lingual method experts.

Quite aside from these resource publications, the membership requests that the state affiliate seek the means to encourage school districts and institutions of higher learning to provide special short-term training programs for teachers, approximately two weeks in duration, and scheduled summers and evenings during the academic year. The members hope that the affiliate organization can also encourage the financial support of such training institutes by state and local agencies so that teachers will not be forced to expend their own funds to attend. The constituency also would like to see a consultant service developed and funded so that those consultants listed in the resource publications might have special funds available to compensate their time and travel when they are engaged in consulting with those who need help without placing a strain on the budgets of schools or districts which need the help.

Finally, the members present at that meeting urged the state affiliate to work toward the development of a credential for the field so that the professional status of teachers in the field can be maintained or upgraded, so that the field can be recognized as a specialized area of professional activity, and so that its practitioner can be regarded as equal in every way with their colleagues who teach disciplines which some people regard as "more academic."

All of these requests are reasonable and represent areas in which an affiliate like CATESOL can function. The obvious problems involve money. The publication of all of the items listed is costly. CATESOL has succeeded up to the present time in publishing two issues of a newsletter and in producing a membership directory. Other activities will be undertaken as time and the availability of funds allow. Probably the most distant of the objectives is a consulting service. This activity is the most costly, the most difficult to organize, and the most difficult to justify in the sense that its product is least visible and most difficult to measure in hard-data terms.

It is clear, however, that the officers of such an affiliate organization can and must exert their influence in pertinent affairs within the State. The officers must meet with appropriate officials of State government in an attempt to make known to legislators and bureaucrats the needs of the profession and the requirements of the individuals who constitute the profession. If indeed a credential is to be created, the officers and the organization as a whole must take the initiative and provide the leadership in developing the criteria which will be included in such a credential.

At the same time, it is also clear that such an organization is only capable of being as good as its collective membership is good. No single group of officers will be able to accomplish all of these objectives without the willing support of the membership. It is going to take the cooperative efforts of large numbers of people to accomplish even the simplest of these objectives. Initially, at least, the funds for the activities of the organization will have to come out of the

pockets of the members. Initially, at least, individual members are going to have to be willing to accept responsibility for a number of activities like the relatively unexciting research work involved in pulling together a list of courses and programs in the TESL field throughout the state.

All of the objectives listed here so far might be accomplished by any statewide organization without the necessity of affiliation with a national. That affiliation, however, from the point of view of the national group accrues benefits to the affiliate at the same time that it derives benefits from the affiliate. Much of the significant research that has had so great an impact on the profession is carried on at a national level and reported at a national level. Affiliation with a national organization involved in research can make available at the local level the benefits of that research and development. For example, TESOL is presently engaged in a research project for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I am sure that the fruits of that research will become available to the profession as a whole and will derive benefits to the grassroots around the tree that bears them as well as to the tree itself. Quite aside from that mixed metaphor, it is obvious that both the local affiliate and the parent national organization are going to be involved in political activities at various levels of government. The work of the TESOL Committee on Socio-Political Concerns of Minority Groups has already demonstrated the relevance of political activism and the difficulty of being involved in language teaching without being equally involved in the cultural, social, and political lives of the recipients of language teaching. In this important area, the parent national organization and the local affiliate can strengthen each other; the parent by exerting its influence at the national level and lending its prestige at the local level, and the affiliate by exerting its influence at the local level and lending the weight of its voice and vote at the national level.

Finally, it seems to me that the local affiliate can have the most beneficial effect upon the national simply because the local af-

filiate does indeed constitute the grass-roots level. Through its officers and through specific liaison with the national association, the local affiliate can feed upward the needs, aspirations, and problems which must be the central concern and the raison d'etre of the parent group.

These are some of the activities that an affiliate can undertake. In turn, these activities constitute some of the means by which that poor teacher on the firing line can be kept ahead of obsolescence. The gloom of the picture that I painted at the first of my talk can be dispelled. H. G. Wells remarked, half a century ago, that "Human history more and more becomes a race between education and catastrophe." The truth of that is even more obvious today than it was fifty years ago. The affiliate must not be looked upon as a panacea. It is not inherently capable of miracles. All of these activities will take at least time.